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Reflecting on the Occult: Nurturing “Critical Being” through Exposure to Marginal or Controversial Ideas

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What’s Important about the Occult for Critical Thinking?

“Critical thinking” is a bit of a hornet’s nest. Scholars do not agree on how to define it and at times it has been (problematically) upheld as a distinctly Western phenomenon. There are also disagreements about how it can best be taught or demonstrated to students. This centres on whether it can be directly taught as a skill (the preferred option within the literature) or whether it can successfully be embedded within the substantive educational experience. I would argue that “critical being” (Barnett 1997) is the cornerstone of higher education. *“Critical persons are more than just critical thinkers. They are able critically to engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge”* (1). This fundamental “state” can be actively encouraged in teaching on the occult or paranormal phenomena.

My teaching focuses on nurturing critical being and encouraging nonjudgmental perspectives. These aspects are embedded in much of my teaching and I have found certain activities to be quite effective. One of these is to actively encourage questions and promote discussions in traditional lectures as “stop and think” (Moon 2008) moments. These moments are either student-led (e.g., a student asks a question or challenges the material being presented) or teacher-selected (e.g., I consciously stop the lecture to pose a question or problem for consideration). When these moments occur, a meaningful exchange between students is the priority. This might be achieved by requesting multiple perspectives (e.g., actively inviting students to play devil’s advocate) allowing them to “try on” or inhabit diverse standpoints. For instance, in a session on spirit mediumship, some students express incredulity. This can quickly become ridicule or mockery. However, after introducing mediumship, I ask students to envisage one of the following possibilities, either:

- a) that they believe in spirits and that mediums can contact the spirit world, or
- b) that they feel neutral about, but open-minded to this possibility

They then reflect on what purpose or use mediumship might have. This exercise exposes the students to views often radically different from their own and encourages them to respectfully consider other people’s experiences and beliefs.

Sometimes I probe a student’s question. Students regularly ask, “Are near-death experiences (NDEs) real?” In response, I might query what is meant by “real” or ask what we need to know before we can answer the question. Throughout this, the aim is to foster and support exploration in a safe space where they can take risks. All viewpoints are encouraged; dismissal of another’s beliefs or ideas is not. Once

this is established, I might ask for differing views on the “causes” of NDEs and encourage students to critically explore the underlying assumptions and evidence associated with each view. During this, it is likely that ambiguities and paradoxes about what constitutes “death” are discussed and students are exposed to these. Such ambiguities, Meyers (1986) suggests, can create “disequilibrium” that can prepare students for key shifts in thinking.

These shifts can also be facilitated through the introduction of marginal ideas. In discussing the implications of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) for our understanding of consciousness, the filter theory of consciousness can be effectively used. This is a theory which suggests that the brain is a conduit for consciousness, rather than a store. Exploring radical or controversial ideas such as these appears to promote much more inquisitive and freer thinking. It seems to help students think more creatively and independently. A subject with controversial elements (e.g., the paranormal, the occult, religion) can, in line with Meyer’s (1986) ideas about posing controversial questions, help to foster critical being particularly well as there is plenty of room for discussion and inherent ambiguities in these subjects.

These moments are important for several reasons. Firstly, they break up the lecture and provide a different focus which is fundamental for effective and active learning. Secondly, they promote dialogue and interaction between the students. “Critical thinking is a social activity” and dialogue in this way encourages the practical demonstration of the fact that there are “different views of the same idea” (Moon 2008, 132). These moments can help students to shift their thinking and demonstrates multiple perspectives. Embedding this active engagement aims to engender a critical ethos throughout.

How Did This Come About and Why?

In 2009, I was a researcher exploring the incidence of reported paranormal experiences (RPEs) in Great Britain (Castro et al., 2014). Our results indicated that well over a third of people (36.8%) reported at least one paranormal experience. We argued, in line with Greeley (1991), that the paranormal is (*still*) normal. That is, a significant minority of ordinary people reported these experiences. From my own doctoral research (Castro, 2009) it is also clear that RPEs are sometimes profound and meaningful; they can be important, sometimes pivotal, moments in experients’ lives. Historically, experients have been considered delusional, suffering from psychosis or hallucinations. Furthermore, whilst the public may have an appetite for paranormal entertainment and an expressed fascination with occult phenomena, the acceptance of RPEs (as meaningful even) is inconsistent. There remains a dominant perspective that RPEs are not important and that those who report them are potentially gullible. In other words, the broader social context in which these experiences are understood tends not to be supportive: there is still a degree of social stigma associated with RPEs. This, and my experience with students, motivated me to challenge these dominant ideas about RPEs. We are not obliged to accept the objective reality of an RPE when we appreciate that the experience is subjectively real for the person reporting it. But accepting the “experience” can legitimate and acknowledge subjectivity, help to promote understanding, and reduce stigma.

Successive cohorts of students possess general curiosity about paranormal or occult phenomena and many find the subject interesting and intriguing. However, there is a dominant view of experients as indiscriminating, coupled with an impulsive reaction to reject knowledge or theories seen as alternative or marginal to dominant forms. Seeing experients as naïve and remaining restricted by dominant ideas can lead to belittling people’s experiences and reductive thinking. It is too easy to be dismissive of views and beliefs that are different or contradict cultural narratives. Therefore, it is vital to cultivate an openness and respect for different experiences and worldviews, which includes exposure to research and traditions from non-Western cultures.

If I maintain that the fundamental purpose of higher education is to nurture “critical being” (Barnett 1997), then I am responsible for consciously reflecting on how this might be achieved. Dewey’s (1909) idea of *reflective thinking* is instructive here: the process of thinking is active, not passive, and the exploration of evidence, how we arrive at conclusions, and the consequences of beliefs are important. “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” (Dewey 1909, 9). Vital to this process is the ability to question underlying assumptions, the premises of an argument, and the trustworthiness of the evidence or methodology under scrutiny. Barnett (1997) further argues that critical being is an existential notion about embodying a habit of mind and critical reflection that is connected to action. Inhabiting a state of critical being requires transformation.

Moon (2008) argues that relationship to knowledge is crucial to this: transitioning from absolutism (knowledge as “facts”) to relativism (knowledge as contextually driven and constructed). Supporting and motivating students to experience this shift and inspire the development of “metacognition” (awareness of and ability to reflect on one’s own thinking) involves challenging them. Stimulation is most effective when it is just outside an individual’s comfort zone—a principle based on Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development. There are two main aspects that inform this strategy. One concerns the emphasis on and recognition of the importance of interactive and dialogic forms of learning (influenced by the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin). The other is a critical response to the assumption that “critical thinking” is best taught instrumentally as a skill. Both strands are directed towards nurturing free, independent, and creative thought.

Reflections and Applicability

These are laudable aims, which, in an ideal world, each student would embrace. The reality is that not all students manage to develop critical thinking or critical being. Whilst what we do with them in the classroom is important, and we can aim to foster and nurture critical being, as Jenny Moon (2008, 131) rightly indicates **“one person cannot make another think critically”** [original emphasis]. Teachers can help facilitate critical being but there are many other factors that can affect its development including “environment, motivation and emotion” (Moon 2008, 107), skill in language use, intellectual curiosity, and interest (127). There is no *one* model that fosters creativity and criticality. I like the analogy of teachers as “midwives” (Belenky et al. 1986) offering encouragement and support (rather than knowledge or skills transmission).

Despite this caveat, this approach has various potential positive knock-on effects, particularly for subjects as contested or controversial as religion, the occult or the paranormal, as tolerance feels like an incredibly low expectation regarding RPEs and differing perspectives on existential or metaphysical matters. So, firstly, in promoting understanding through fairmindedness and openness and thereby hopefully reducing stigma. Secondly, in nurturing nonjudgemental positions that are imbued with sensitivity and respect. And thirdly, in elevating the status of differing bodies of knowledge (e.g., cross cultural) and aiming to reduce ethnocentrism.

I have observed that many students respond well to this approach. The nature of the topics covered—as often quite controversial and of intrinsic interest—allow for a broad discussion with a wide range of perspectives. It is also notable that students respond well to opportunities for active and dialogic learning: for instance, “stop and think” moments (Moon 2008). Supplementing traditional teaching formats with simple, but effective practices, are the moments that can kindle improved student engagement and more empowered learning contexts. This approach is supportive of and open to creativity and independence of thought, which may at times challenge dominant ideas and knowledge in

the West. Exposure to, and engagement with, culturally diverse material and sometimes radical or controversial perspectives, especially where they challenge deeply held beliefs or subject “sceptical” ideas to serious examination and promote an original but respectful, sensitive, and balanced approach, can be effective.

Conclusion

Much of the literature argues for a skills-based approach where “critical thinking” is separated out from the substantive content of the higher education experience. Skills-training has some benefits broadly as a foundational aspect of what it means to learn. Furthermore, students have other opportunities to be supported in developing a critical mind set implicitly across the whole degree programme. However, having consciously embedded them into the way I teach and approach this material, and having witnessed the way in which students respond to this strategy, it appears to be effective in nurturing critical being. It works to demonstrate, allows students to practice and experience this and, finally, works to deepen and embody this state. The beauty of this kind of strategy is its simplicity. It can easily be applied in differing teaching contexts. There are ambiguities and paradoxes in most topics and it is eternally possible to find controversial topics to discuss within religious studies. The aim is to encourage intellectual autonomy, reason, and fairmindedness: working towards the cultivation of a sensitive and respectful approach to different perspectives, and aiming to foster a non-judgemental position as a foundation for inhabiting a state of critical being well beyond the educational context.

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